

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

February 29, 2008

## Former Irish president in Seattle urges businesses to help girls

### Robinson says they're key part of nations' prosperity

By Ambreen Ali

Ireland's first female president directly challenged the country's male-dominated political echelon when she was elected in 1990. But that was just the beginning of Mary Robinson's global work to increase visibility of women's needs.

Robinson latest effort brought her to the Rainier Club in Seattle on Thursday, where she urged business leaders to target often neglected teenage girls in anti-poverty work. She told them the prosperity of women ripples directly out to their families and societies -- even the area's economic growth. Her visit came on the heels of a report by the Center for Global Development that says young girls are overlooked in efforts to help poor communities.

The report's crux is that targeting girls between ages 10 and 24 -- the time "that sets the course for the rest of life" -- allows the most influence over them and their societies. Young girls were found to have tremendous effect on how households are run, children are raised and societies function.

Robinson gave the example of a school in Afghanistan that provides bikes for female students

as one successful attempt to empower girls. By doing so, the school elevated the girls' respect in their families and put them in a position to influence others. Robinson now is president of the New York-based group Realizing Rights: The Ethical Global Initiative.

The veteran advocate of human rights and former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights fielded questions from a packed room of executives, who were concerned about how to sell poverty alleviation to board members focused on the bottom line.

"To be sustainable, someone somewhere has to make a profit," said Dick Beahrs, a former media executive. Beahrs moderated the event for the Initiative for Global Development, a Seattle-based national alliance of business leaders interested in finding effective solutions to global poverty.

To his point, Robinson said companies such as Unilever have been successful in creating jobs for teenage girls while keeping their operations effective. She added that young girls play an essential role, particularly through manufacturing jobs, in the global economy.

"They need to also benefit from that economy. Businesses can do more in that regard than a lot of people talking about poverty," she said.

That point resonated with Sally Jewell, REI president and an IGD board member, who said she sees a direct link between her company's mission and that of eliminating poverty.

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## **Former Irish President in Seattle** continued

The report that triggered Thursday's event condemns donors for evading issues that adolescent girls face because they broach sensitive cultural norms. Such taboos include rape, the first sexual experience for 21 percent of Ghanaian girls, a 1999 Population Council study found.

Unequal restrictions are placed on aging girls, who are often domesticated and face resistance in pursuing work or school.

"Ten- to 14-year old girls should be in school, unmarried and provided a healthful environment," author Ruth Levine wrote, say marriage at a young age curtails girl's school and work aspirations and leaves them vulnerable to abuse.

At the event, Levine said a youth-heavy bulge in the populations of developing nations makes the time particularly ripe to focus on making young women contributing, visible members of their societies.